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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000370

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN REGIME BRINGS OUT DANCING ELECTION BEARS
FOR DEMOCRACY SHOW

REF: A. DAMASCUS 0359

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 0317 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: After six weeks of campaigning, voting in Syrian parliamentary elections will be held April 22-23. Although the People's Assembly is a powerless body, there is intense campaigning and heavy spending for many of the 83 seats set aside for independents, especially for the 13 independent seats in play in Damascus, likely the only place, with Homs and Aleppo, where limited competition will occur. Most observers believe independent candidates, the majority of whom are businessmen, seek the office to obtain political influence and protection that can be used primarily for financial gain, such as obtaining government contracts or seeking favors for well-heeled constituents. The regime also benefits from this largely sham exercise in democracy because it provides a veneer of legitimacy for a police state regime that rules by force. In addition, the minority Alawi regime uses moderate Sunni Islamist independent candidates to enhance its legitimacy. Parliament is also used as a key cog in the machinery that gets the Syrian president elected without any opposition. The regime will support and engage in various types of electoral fraud if it believes its already heavy control of the process is not delivering the desired results. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) REGIME CALLS IN THE DANCING BEARS: The short parliamentary electoral campaign in Syria is winding to a close, with voting scheduled for April 22-23. There has been intense campaigning and heavy spending for many of the 83 seats set aside for independents, especially for the 13 independent seats in play in Damascus (out of 250 total seats, 167 of which are reserved for the Baath-Party-dominated National Progressive Front). One of the key questions worth posing is why the independent candidates bother with so much effort and money -- and why the regime presses for such a show -- given that the People's Assembly is a powerless body with essentially no political influence. The truth, however, is that both sides in this spectacle benefit significantly. Most of the independent candidates, certainly in the big cities like Damascus and Aleppo, are businessmen, many of them with an already-developed web of connections to the regime and the SARG bureaucracies. A seat in parliament provides "protection" for such businessmen, giving them parliamentary immunity and political prestige that can be leveraged to open doors to ministers' offices to press for favors or access to government contracts. It also affords them more cover and influence to engage in riskier business ventures including

smuggling, where fortunes can be made quickly.

13. (C) RUNNING FOR OFFICE TO GET RICH: According to one contact, many MP's become intermediaries for hire, raking in unofficial commissions for helping well-heeled constituents obtain a better tax evaluation, for example, or a postponement of military service, or a coveted government scholarship for a family member. To demonstrate how the parliamentary seat helps to enrich, one observer noted that it was not an accident that a construction firm directly connected to a wealthy businessman MP obtained a multi-million-dollar contract to build the huge Ommayad Circle road project. Most MP's, like other senior government officials, understand that the regime has a history of allowing people to "feed at the trough" for a few years," then dismissing them with their money into the political wilderness, according to maverick economist (and a former deputy minister) Riad Abrash. He and others report that many MP's increase their wealth substantially while in the People's Assembly. To make that possible, many are perfectly willing to invest the front money -- ranging from tens of thousands of dollars to millions -- to gain a seat. Businessman Mohammed Hamsho is thought to have spent ten million dollars to gain his seat in a previous election. Again this year he is spending huge sums to bankroll the most prominent list of independents.

13. (C) NON-PECUNIARY BENEFITS FOR AN MP: Obtaining a seat in the assembly also allows parliamentarians to raise their standing with the regime, giving them a better position in the political and social pecking order. While most of this is focused on financial gain, some use it for more political reasons, although the accent is on getting a better

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understanding of the regime and gaining individual political influence (rather than on party politics, which the regime has fenced off as illegitimate activity). Dr. Samir al-Taki told A/DCM that his time as a parliamentarian in the mid-1990's had allowed him to understand the often subtle dynamics of regime politics, to sense more accurately the constantly shifting redlines that made the difference in either developing small margins for maneuver on all manner of political, journalistic, academic, and financial affairs or tripping up and getting into severe trouble with a police state regime. A few, like Sunni businessman Ihsan Sankar, believe they can engage in modest politics at the margins, if they are careful in how they criticize the regime. Sankar is running again -- after opting out after two terms in 1998 -- because he believes the regional situation has changed since then in ways that will give new life to reform currents -- both economic and political -- that the regime has effectively closed off for much of the past decade. (However Sankar is part of a list that has been targeted by the SARG and it is not clear he will prevail.)

14. (C) HOW THE REGIME BENEFITS FROM THE SHAM: The regime also profits from this largely sham democracy spectacle. The show of elections provides at least a veneer of legitimacy for what would otherwise be (and in reality is) the exercise of political rule by brute force. The Assembly is also used as part of the machinery to that ensures the nomination and election of Bashar al-Asad (and his father before him) to the presidency. The regime also uses the election to ensure that regime pillars get "huge slices of the cake," using their MP/business world front men. Getting substantial private sector representation into Parliament -- and publicly befoiled in the corruption and cronyistic opportunism that has characterized the two Asad regimes for decades -- also allows the regime to communicate a subtle, delegitimizing message to the public, noted Abrash: "You see. There is no political alternative. The private sector is more corrupt than we are." In shaping this electoral spectacle, however, the regime wants to ensure control -- this year more than ever, according to many observers, given its level of

nervousness -- and the minimum of fuss. It also wants to make absolutely certain that no real democracy is permitted to flourish, since it is well aware that as a minority regime that took power by force rather than through the ballot box, real democracy would spell its rapid demise.

15. (C) REGIME USE OF SUNNI ISLAMISTS: While most members of the old Damascene elites in the business community have consistently shunned this stunted parliament in years past, the regime has usually enticed a few representatives, such as current speaker Mahmoud Abrash, to run and assume prominent positions. (Note: Riad Abrash told A/DCM he has refused to speak to his cousin, Mahmoud, since he chose to run for Parliament in 2003.) The regime has also used the election of Sunni Islamist moderates to enhance its legitimacy and disguise more effectively the minority character of the Alawite regime. There is some jockeying between Islamists supported by Sheikh Salah Kuftaro (who runs the Abu Noor Institute and supports Hamsho's al-Feiha list) and those like current MP Mohammed Habash, who are on a separate list (thought to be supported behind the scenes by Asif Shawkat, the head of Syrian Military Intelligence). Most observers believe that all of these Islamists are under near-complete control of the regime. The Islamists are competing, for their part, to ensure their group maintains its special influence with the regime and, in the manner of most Islamist political groupings in the region, to vaunt their gradually increasing political power and incremental takeover of available institutions of influence.

16. (C) IS THERE ANY REAL COMPETITION?: Much of this race is controlled by the regime ahead of time, in the shaping of the lists of candidates. Outside of Damascus, the regime exerts more strenuous efforts -- and is generally successful -- in severely limiting who runs as independents and in dictating precisely who wins. In Damascus it has allowed a bit more elbowing among independents, reflecting to some degree the jockeying among regime pillars like Shawkat, with their lists, to ensure their people are positioned for a good share of the spoils. At present there are 13 seats for independents in play. Not all the candidates on the two lists thought to be fully supported by the regime -- Hamsho's, with six candidates, and that of fellow businessman

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Hashem Akkad, with 10 -- can win, given that limited number of seats. Sankar's list is of eight candidates, which is considered to be modestly critical of the regime, is also providing some competition. (Comment: In years past Hamsho was closely allied with Asad brother Maher. There is disagreement about the degree to which he has patched up a falling out over money that he had with key regime pillars last year. Sankar believes the prominence of Hamsho's list shows that the feud is over.) The jockeying among regime favorites and others is permitted but is not allowed to get so intense as to hint at any real splits in the regime. Well-heeled candidates who might threaten that status quo, such as regime-designated bad boy Adnan Shama'a are forced out of the race ahead of time, using whatever legal pretext is available, in combination with behind-the-scenes pressure from the security services (ref B). (Note: Shama'a is now thought to be in hiding in Lebanon.) The regime of course completely controls the vast majority of the races with its Baath Party-dominated lists of National Progressive Front candidates, who run unopposed.

17. (C) ARE FRAUD AND BALLOT STUFFING A PROBLEM?: In the end, if the competition gets too heated and the regime's favorite sons (after some preliminary soundings on the first of the two days of voting) are not doing as well as expected, the regime is expected to cheat as much as necessary behind the scenes to fix the results among the independents and massage the turnout totals to show a respectable level of public interest. Most contacts we have spoken to believe the regime can stuff ballot boxes, allow favored candidates to manipulate voting, and even manufacture fraudulent totals, as

necessary, to obtain the desired results, although it begins small scale and only gets heavy-handed if its already-intensive control at earlier stages is not yielding the desired results. Representatives of security services at every polling stations keep a very close eye on all ballot boxes, and elections officials have key opportunities, for example in transporting ballot boxes from such stations to counting centers, to stuff them, away from the scrutiny of candidates' representatives. Even simpler is the selective use of the military vote, which is used to pad the numbers of any candidate the government chooses (and is shaped by orders to vote or not to vote for certain candidates). There will not be any independent monitoring by international observers or by neutral Syrians, that could put a brake on such actions if the regime decides it is necessary to engage in them.

CORBIN